

**Statement from Karen Rivers Watch for International Day of Action for Rivers and
Against Dams**

March 14, 2026

(Saturday)

On March 14, 2025, in honour of the International Day of Action for Rivers and Against Dams, the Indigenous Karen/K'nyaw people living along the Salween River, in collaboration with Karen/K'nyaw civil society organizations, environmental activists, and Indigenous leaders, gathered on the Salween Riverbank to issue this public declaration statement. The declaration emphasizes the free flow of Myanmar's rivers, calls for the termination of mining projects that cause significant damage to rivers and their aquatic life, calls for the termination of large-scale dam projects on the Salween River in Myanmar (Burma), and recognizes indigenous peoples' rights to peace and self-determination. The theme of this year's International Day of Action for Rivers and against Dams is "[Protect Rivers, Protect People.](#)" This statement is in line with this theme.

Rivers such as Irrawaddy, Salween, Chindwin, Sittaung, Namtu, Nam Kok, Paung Laung, and Tanintharyi rivers provide vital livelihood benefits (drinking water, food, water for farming, water for cleaning and washing, etc.) to Indigenous communities who live along these rivers. Additionally, these rivers contain a rich biodiversity of plants and animals, including many endemic and endangered fish and aquatic species. Importantly, these rivers carry deep cultural and spiritual/sacred value for Indigenous communities. The Myanmar government, often in collaboration with powerful private investors, has been constructing large dams, illegal mining, and other development projects to extract the rich resources and wealth found within Indigenous communities without free, prior, and informed consent from these communities. These exploitative dams, mining, and development projects provide little to no benefit to the Indigenous communities. Worse, these poorly regulated dams, mining operations, and development projects are making the rivers become very polluted and contaminated with toxic chemicals. This is not just leading to loss of water resources and biodiversity but also destroying farmlands and causing forced displacement. Consequently, many indigenous communities who live near and depend on these rivers are facing an acute decline in their economy, health, and livelihood in their daily life.

As we enter the 5th year of the 2021 military coup, the peaceful development and stability of Myanmar remain uncertain and precarious. As of late, the daily air strikes and military attacks by the Myanmar junta government are becoming more intense, which threaten the security and safety of indigenous communities. The coup has revived armed resistance across the nation, making internal fighting and conflict even more deadly. Also, due to the coup, the economic situation has severely deteriorated to all-time low conditions. To withstand international sanctions and to fund the rising military expenses, the Myanmar military dictator government, also known as the State Administration Council (SAC), has to rely heavily on national natural resources extraction. This has especially accelerated the development of critical and rare-earth mineral mining projects (e.g., tin, antimony, dysprosium, and terbium) in the northeast of Myanmar and increased unauthorized illegal mining activities. As a result, there has been a massive increase in contamination and pollution of streams and rivers. Myanmar has become one of the worst countries to suffer from widespread deforestation and irreparable damage to natural environments. To make matters worse, the irregularity and unexpected extreme changes in the weather/climate conditions have caused significant damage to many communities, with vulnerable communities often facing the worst impacts. Similar to what is happening around the world, communities across Myanmar are facing substantial increases in crop failures and adverse livelihood impacts due to worsening heavy rainfall, floods, and agricultural pest outbreaks. They are also witnessing firsthand the rapid decrease in biodiversity within their lands.

To meet the national electricity requirement, the current military government in Myanmar is trying to restart the hydropower projects on the Irrawaddy and Salween rivers. This unwise decision has been taken without consultation with or consent from Indigenous communities who live along these rivers and without any regard to the sustainability and health of the environment. The military dictators and the powerful corporations involved in developing the project will profit from this project, with little to no benefits for the local communities. In March 2025, there was a major earthquake of 7.7 magnitude, damaging many households and some dams within the country. As the geographical location of Myanmar is situated in the middle of the Indian Plateau and the Sunda Plateau, large-scale dam projects along active seismic fault lines, such as the Myit Sone Dam Project, can increase the risks of earthquakes; relatedly, dams built near fault lines are at higher risk of structural failure and collapse. As such, large-scale dams do not align with the needs of

local communities' livelihoods and are instead geared toward maximizing profits, benefits, and wealth for the military government and its crony corporations.

In November and December of 2025, researchers from Chiang Mai University conducted a water quality test in the Salween River. The research found that the river is contaminated with arsenic, lead, and mercury. For example, the acceptable standard for arsenic in rivers should be 0.01 mg/l. However, arsenic level in some areas of Salween River was found to be at 0.55 mg/l, which is 55 times the safe limit. Likewise, the river, which starts east of Mong Hsat township, Shan state, and flows into Thailand as the Kok River, was also found to be highly contaminated with arsenic due to rare-earth and gold mining. In June 2025, the Shan, Thai, and other ethnic communities organized a protest to call for actions to stop the contamination of this river. A growing number of studies have shown that the increase in toxic chemicals in these rivers is due to intensive mining along the riverbanks. This situation endangers the future of free-flowing and healthy rivers. Many local communities in Myanmar rely heavily on the Salween River and other rivers for everything from drinking water and food to irrigation and other important livelihood activities. If there are no effective legal actions against these mining activities and destructive development projects, the ecosystem and health for those who live along the river will worsen by the day.

As today is the International Day of Action for Rivers and Against Dams, we call for the termination of mining, large dams, and other harmful development projects that cause significant damage to rivers and aquatic ecosystems. Together with the Karen River Watch, the indigenous Karen community, Local Karen CSOs and NGOs, and other organizations that we work with, we would like to call on the Ethnic De facto Government, ethnic resistance organizations, ethnic councils, and people's administrations, the National Union Government, governments of other countries, UN agencies, and investors to take effective actions to stop the deterioration of rivers and the natural environment in Myanmar.

De facto Government, Ethnic Resistance Organizations, ethnic councils, and people's administrations should:

1. During the period of the realization of the federal system, they must object and stop all natural resources extraction and dam projects that are being implemented without the free, prior, and informed consent of the local indigenous communities.

2. Encourage international and all related authorities to cooperate with local organizations when taking legal action against the deterioration of the natural environment and the decline of community livelihoods due to excessive extraction of natural resources.
3. Promote, recognize, and protect the rivers, natural environment, and traditional land conservation methods in ways that recognize and uplift the leadership role of local indigenous communities.
4. Develop and implement local and federal-level environmental protection and water governance/management policies, which give rights to the local community to own, protect, manage, decide, and benefit from rivers and natural environments (in line with [UN Sustainable Development Goals 6 and Sustainable Development Goal 14](#)).

The National Union Government should

1. Demand international organizations and the relevant governments to take legal action against the perpetrators of any corporations, government bodies, or groups who extracted natural resources in excessive, unregulated, and damaging ways during the period of the military coup and caused significant damage to the rivers, natural environment, and the livelihood of the community.
2. Develop and implement an effective national environmental and water governance/protection policies grounded in the federal system and in line with international guidelines including SDG 6, SDG 14, and [UNDP’s Water and Ocean Governance Program \(WOGP\)](#) and Protocol on Water and Health

The international community and ASEAN should

1. Stop any collaboration, recognition, and formalization of relationships with the SAC government and military entities that terrorize and kill the local population.
2. Take legal action against SAC in accordance with international law and impose sanctions on SAC for planning and implementing major mining, dam, and extractive development projects that cause significant damage to rivers and natural environments.
3. To cooperate with the Ethnic Ee Facto governments on taking effective legal action to stop the deterioration of the natural environment and water systems, and the decline in community livelihood due to excessive extraction of natural resources.

4. Develop effective transboundary freshwater management policies to promote cross-border and cross-national collaboration in protecting rivers and water systems that span multiple countries (like Salween River, Kok River).

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